



## Identifying children's perspectives on anti-social behaviour: Variations by home area and the implications

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### ABSTRACT

The paper examines the views of children living in contrasting British suburbs: exploring their perceptions of the occurrence of anti-social behaviour (ASB), their anxieties about different types of incident, and their views on appropriate punishments. Based on interviews with over 260 children aged 11–16 years, and 44 adults with a professional involvement in ASB, the evidence shows that the influence of home area on children's perspectives of ASB varies according to the type of ASB under consideration. For 'interpersonal' ASB, children appear especially sensitive in the poorer area, where this ASB is much more common. Theories of normalisation regarding interpersonal ASB are not supported, as children in the poorer area are sensitised to the problems, rather than hardened, arguing for an urgent policy response. Regarding environmental ASB and the role of home area, the findings are reversed, and theories of normalisation are supported. Children's lesser concerns about environmental ASB in the poorer, most affected area, pose rather different challenges to policy-makers, arguing for the selection of effective reduction measures at a *local* level, designed to better reflect the differing views of children in different areas. Identifying children's perspectives brings new understandings to the multiple geographies of ASB, highlighting the importance of distinguishing between different types of ASB and raising awareness of the ways in which children's perspectives may be similar and different from adults' views. Our findings argue strongly for the central role of area in theoretical and applied ASB research, and a continuing emphasis on 'the local'.

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### 1. Introduction

Discussion and research in Britain concerning anti-social behaviour (ASB) has been burgeoning for more than a decade, yet children's perspectives on an issue for which children are recognised as so central often remain missing, just as the geographical dimension has also been neglected. This paper emerges out of a research project in Swansea, Wales, which focuses on ASB and children, and which incorporates a methodology designed to capture the influence of 'home area'. The project involved interviewing more than 260 children aged 11–16 years who live in different suburban areas, and also adults who have a professional involvement with ASB. The research stands apart from other studies of ASB by examining the views of children, and how these vary by area of residence, thus enabling the paper to make a distinctive contribution to an expanding literature which is sometimes lacking in empirical data. Although the geographies of crime/ASB and of children are well-established fields, studies which overlap the two fields are rare. The focus of this paper on children in different geographical areas should enhance our understanding of the challenges to the

reduction of ASB, with clear implications for policy initiatives, and the extent to which these should be tailored to local circumstances. The sub-sections which follow, begin by looking at ASB, its 'association' with the activities of children, and the way in which area is a key dimension. The aims of the paper emerge out of the attempt to intertwine the triple themes of ASB, children and geographical area in order to emphasise an empirical, policy-oriented contribution to the literature, and to enhance our understanding of the geographies of ASB. Evidence from the Swansea research project suggests how children are sensitised or normalised to different types of ASB in ways that appear to reflect the different characteristics of their home areas, with obvious implications not only for the urgency of a policy response, but also regarding the value of 'the local' in both theoretical and applied approaches to ASB.

#### 1.1. Defining ASB and its policy significance

The umbrella term anti-social behaviour (ASB) is used for a range of undesirable and inappropriate behaviours of varying levels of severity, both criminal and non-criminal. Its fluid definition and meanings have been extensively discussed and a range of typologies have been employed to disaggregate the concept (Millie,

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2008, 2009a; Harradine et al., 2004). At its core, ASB is described as an act which causes “harassment, alarm, or distress” (Crime and Disorder Act 1998), which has an adverse impact on quality of life and a clear association with deprivation or neighbourhood decline (Millie, 2007a; Squires and Stephen, 2005). Evolving in the 1990s out of an earlier concern with what was then termed “disorder” (Burney, 2005), ASB was propelled to become a major focus of British government activity through New Labour’s ‘Respect’ agenda (Bannister et al., 2006; Helms et al., 2007; Jamieson, 2005; Millie, 2009b; Squires, 2008). After 1997, successive British Labour governments produced a plethora of new tools such as anti-social behaviour orders, for local authorities and police forces to use to curb ASB. The wave of legislation created new and faster means for delivering punishment and administering ‘justice’, with children often the targets of the new powers.

### 1.2. Children and ASB

The association between young people and ASB/crime has been well documented. Crime and Justice Surveys and other statistics reveal that young people perpetrate a disproportionate amount of the types of crime that tend to be recorded (Hayward and Sharp, 2005; Madoc-Jones, 2006; Van Mastrigt and Farrington, 2009). Moreover, evidence from recent British Crime Surveys indicates the substantial proportion of adults who view teenagers hanging around in public space as the most common sign of local disorder (Moon et al., 2009, p. 27). Children and young people are increasingly seen “primarily as potential threats to public safety and social order” (Mason and Prior, 2008, p. 280), with adult perspectives and perceptions of insecurity dominating the drive for intervention and change regarding young people and ASB (Crawford, 2009a, p. 6). Reflecting these views, children and young people have been made a key target for Government measures to tackle ASB (Crawford, 2009b, p. 810; Tisdall, 2006).

The energetic political drive to tackle ASB has often meant that children have been neglected as victims and that their views and opinions have rarely been sought. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 paved the way for the participation of children (defined in the convention as aged under 18 years) in decisions which have consequences for their everyday life, and was accompanied and followed by legislation in the UK, notably the Children Acts of 1989 and 2004. However, despite a growing emphasis on children’s rights (Archard, 2004; Matthews and Limb, 1999), the current exclusion of children’s perspectives within many community safety debates and decision-making forums is widely recognised (Haines and Case, 2008; Hill and Wright, 2003; Nayak, 2003). There is of course the argument that most people, adults as well as children, are “passive bystanders” in relation to crime and punishment (Giangrande et al., 2008, p. 5), but the heavy focus on children and young people in debates about ASB argues particularly for their participation and a recognition of the importance of their views. While a burgeoning of interest in children’s perspectives is evident in much social science research (Weller, 2006) and in certain recent government reports (e.g. DSCF, 2010), further development is still required within the fields of ASB and crime. Moreover, mirroring the emphasis within the majority of youth studies on the post 16 age group (Nayak, 2003, p. 305), even the modestly growing numbers of research publications relating to young people and ASB/crime often focus on the older end of the age group up to 25 years old, thus paying less attention to the involvement of children (Roe and Ashe, 2008; Sadler, 2008). Another limitation in much of the research is that even where children are involved, the numbers of children included are very small, and evidence is usually qualitative rather than quantitative, restricting the scope for generalisation.

### 1.3. The local area and understanding ASB

The importance of area or neighbourhood to our understanding of ASB, has been recognised in relation to aspects of crime for many decades. Research indicates that place and locality are a key influence on offending (Wikstrom and Loeber, 2000; Clarke, 1997; Brantingham and Brantingham, 1981, 1995; Cohen and Felson, 1979; Herbert and Hyde, 1985). Moreover fear, like crime itself, varies by area, and studies have shown that fear is differentially experienced by different individuals in different types of spaces (e.g. Pain, 2000; Pain and Townshend, 2002; Shirlow and Pain, 2003). Thus for many years, the spatial distribution of crime and locations of fear of crime have been used to target limited resources at places known to have particular problems, in order to achieve maximum impact for the time and money invested (Ratcliffe, 2004).

The role of area is also recognised as important in understanding people’s *perspectives* on ASB. These perspectives cannot be assumed to embrace fear, for, as Carvalho and Lewis (2003) have shown, residents in an inner city area of Chicago could display a “sense of safety in the face of crime and disorder” (p. 787). The ways in which perceptions of ASB or disorder are formed are extremely complex (Sampson and Raudenbush, 2004; Sampson, 2009) and reflect an array of drivers (Mackenzie et al., 2010; Thorpe and Wood, 2004). Analysis of evidence in the British Crime Surveys shows that adult perception of ASB “is driven by personal, household and area characteristics as well as the direct and indirect experience of crime and ASB” (Mackenzie et al., 2010, p. 3). Yet, as Taylor et al. (2010, p. 60) have stressed, “we know relatively little about the geography of such perceptions”. Moreover, Millie (2008, p. 381) has argued convincingly “that what is, or is not, regarded as anti-social can be very context-specific”. People have behavioural expectations for particular locations, and “what is tolerated or even celebrated, is dependent on norms of aesthetic acceptability for that place” (Millie, 2008, p. 388). With reference to Upson (2006) and his own earlier work, Millie also emphasises “the spatiality of people’s concerns and experiences of ASB” (Millie, 2008, p. 383). Sellin’s (1938) report on culture, conflict and crime was pioneering in this regard, in explaining how particular areas or groups can develop their own norms of behaviours and values. The ideas were illustrated in Anderson’s (1999) ethnographic research in crime-ridden areas of inner city Philadelphia, which highlighted the ways that the rules of civil law can be weakened and replaced by a localised “code of the street” (Anderson, 1999, p. 9). Not only are people’s interpretations of ASB related to the areas in question, but their interpretations of ASB will reflect their own social norms and experiences, based on the areas with which they are most familiar and the social groups to which they belong. This ‘area effect’ can therefore embrace a range of diverse aspects relating to environmental and social characteristics: the quality of housing and public space, the perceived frequency of ASB, and the types of families living there, amongst other characteristics.

### 1.4. Local area, children and ASB: research aims

As we have illustrated, geographical approaches to the study of ASB/crime have been represented in the literature over many decades, but more recent work recognises that the emphasis on area is insufficient. Matthews and Briggs (2008), for example, criticise the lack of focus on the local causes and context of ASB in the recent pattern of reactive interventions driven by national targets and funding. Where children are concerned, an insufficient awareness of the role of local area invites particular criticism. A variety of social science research on and with children has pointed to the importance of neighbourhood for children (see Meek, 2008; McKendrick, 2000; Matthews and Limb, 1999). Certainly as regards

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